LEVERAGE: FRANCE HAD MORE THAN THE UNITED STATES

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II. A. 2. LEVERAGE: FRANCE HAD MORE THAN THE UNITED STATES

It is sometimes asserted that France could not have continued the war in Indochina without American aid, but that the United States failed to use its considerable leverage on the French to force them to take more positive steps towards granting complete independence to the Associated States. An examination of Franco-American relations between 1950-1954 suggests, however, that American leverage was severely limited and that, given the primacy accorded in U.S. policy to the containment of communism in Southeast Asia, French leverage on the United States was the stronger of the two.

1. American Leverage on France

a. NATO and Marshall Plan

In the first postwar decade, France was relatively weak and depended upon the United States through NATO and the Marshall Plan for its military security and economic revival. But neither NATO nor the Marshall Plan offered usable fulcrums for influencing French policy on Indochina. Both were judged by the U.S. Government and public to be strongly in the American national interest at a time when the Soviet threat to Western Europe, either through overt aggression or internal subversion, was clearly recognizable. A communist take-over in France was a real possibility. (The French Communist Party was the largest political party in the nation, and, at the time, quite militant in character.) Thus, an American threat to withdraw military and economic support to metropolitan France if it did not alter its policies in Indochina was not plausible. To threaten France with sanctions in NATO or through the Marshall Plan would have jeopardized a U.S. interest in Europe more important than any in Indochina.

b. Military Assistance Program

The chief remaining source of influence was the military assistance program to the French in Indochina. Announced by President Truman on May 8, 1950, in response to an urgent French request of February 16, 1950, for military and economic assistance, the purpose of the aid was to help the French in the prosecution of the war against the Viet Minh. The American Ambassador in Paris was called to the Quay d'Orsay, following a determination by the French Government that "it should set forth to the United States Government fully and frankly the extreme gravity of the situation in Indochina from French point of view as a result of recent developments and the expectation that at least increased military aid will be furnished to Ho Chi Minh from Communist China." He was told:

> "...that the effort in Indochina was such a drain on France that a long-term program of assistance was necessary and it was only from the United States that it could come. Otherwise...it was very likely that France might be forced

to reconsider her entire policy with the possible view to cutting her losses and withdrawing from Indochina...looking into the future it was obvious...that France could not continue indefinitely to bear this burden alone if the expected developments in regard to increased assistance to Ho Chi Minh came about...." 1/

Although the decision to extend aid to the French military effort in Indochina was taken before the outbreak of the Korean War, it clearly was heavily influenced by the fall of Nationalist China and the arrival of Communist Chinese troops on the Indochina border in December, 1949. The Ho Chi Minh regime was recognized as the legal government of Vietnam by the Chinese Communists on January 18, 1950, and twelve days later the Soviet Government similarly announced its recognition. The NSC was thereupon asked "to undertake a determination of all practicable United States measures to protect its security in Indochina and to prevent the expansion of communist aggression in that area." In NSC 64 (February 27, 1950) it concluded that:

"It is important to United States security interests that all practicable measures be taken to prevent further communist expansion in Southeast Asia. Indochina is a key area of Southeast Asia and is under immediate threat.

"The neighboring countries of Thailand and Burma could be expected to fall under Communist domination if Indochina were controlled by a Communist-dominated government. The balance of Southeast Asia would then be in grave hazard." 2/

The Joint Chiefs of Staff, referring on April 5, 1950, to intelligence estimates indicating that the situation in Southeast Asia had deteriorated, noted that "without United States assistance, this deterioration will be accelerated." 3/ Therefore, the rationale for the decision to aid the French was to avert Indochina's sliding into the communist camp, rather than aid for France as a colonial power or a fellow NATO ally.

U.S. assistance, which began modestly with $10 million in 1950, reached $1,063 million in fiscal year 1954, at which time it accounted for 78% of the cost of the French war burden. The major portion of the increase came in the last year of the war, following the presentation in 1953 of the Navarre Plan, which called for the enlargement of Franco-Vietnamese forces and a dynamic strategy to recapture the initiative and pave the way for victory by 1955. The optimistic endorsement of the Navarre Plan by Lt. General John W. O'Daniel, head of the MAAG in Indochina, as being capable of turning the tide and leading to a decisive victory over the Viet Minh contributed to Washington's agreement to substantially raise the level of assistance. But equally important, the Navarre Plan, by being a concrete proposal which

held out the promise of ending the long war, put France in a position to pressure the United States for more funds to underwrite the training and equipping of nine additional French battalions and a number of new Vietnamese units.

c. U.S. Supports Independence for Associated States

Throughout the period of assistance to the French military effort, American policy makers kept in mind the necessity of encouraging the French to grant the Associated States full independence and to take practical measures in this direction, such as the training of Vietnamese officers and civil servants. Such active persuasion was delicate and difficult because of the high sensitivity of the French to any "interference" in their "internal" affairs.

A reading of the NSC memorandum and the France-American diplomatic dialogue of the time indicates that Washington kept its eyes on the ultimate goal of the de-colonialization of Indochina. Indeed, it was uncomfortable in finding itself -- forced by the greater necessity of resisting Viet Minh communism -- in the same bed as the French. American pressure may well have helped account for the public declaration of Premier Joseph Laniel of July 3, 1953, that the independence and sovereignty of the Associated States would be "perfected" by transferring to them various functions which had remained under French control, even though no final date was set for complete independence. 4/ At an NSC meeting on August 6, 1953 President Eisenhower stated that assistance to the French would be determined by three conditions:

(1) A public French commitment to "a program which will insure the support and cooperation of the native Indochina";

(2) A French invitation for "close /U.S./ military advice";

(3) Renewed assurances on the passage of the EDC. 5/

Consistent with these, Washington's decision of September 9, 1953, to grant $385 million towards implementation of the Navarre Plan was made dependent upon a number of conditions. The American Ambassador was instructed to inform Prime Minister Laniel and Foreign Minister Bidault that the United States Government would expect France to:

> "....continue pursue policy of perfecting independence of Associated States in conformity with July 3 declaration;
>
> "facilitate exchange information with American military authorities and take into account their views in developing and carrying out French military plans Indochina;
>
> "assure that no basic or permanent alteration of plans and programs for NATO forces will be made as result of additional effort Indochina;...." 6/

d. Limitation on American Leverage

The United States attempted to use its military assistance program to gain leverage over French policies, but was severely constrained in what it could do. The U.S. military mission (MAAG) in Saigon was small and limited by the French in its functions to a supply-support group. Allocation of all U.S. aid to the Associated States had to be made, by agreement, solely through the French. Thus, MAAG was not allowed to control the dispensing of supplies once they arrived in Vietnam. MAAG officers were not given the necessary freedom to develop intelligence information on the course of the war; information supplied by the French was limited, and often unreliable or deliberately misleading. The French resisted repeated U.S. admonitions that the native armies of the Associated States be built up and consequently they did not create a true national Vietnamese army. With some minor exceptions, the French excluded American advisors from participating in the training for the use of the materials being furnished by the U.S.

General Navarre viewed any function of MAAG in Saigon beyond bookkeeping to be an intrusion upon internal French affairs. Even though it would have been difficult beyond 1952 to continue the war without American aid, the French never permitted participation by U.S. officials in strategic planning or policy making. 7/ Moreover, the French suspected the economic aid mission of being over-sympathetic to Vietnamese nationalism. The director of the economic aid program, Robert Blum, and the DCM of the American Embassy, Edmund Guillion, were subjected to French criticisms of their pro-Vietnamese views, although the American Ambassador, Donald Heath, remained staunchly pro-French. Thus, French officials insisted that American assistance be furnished with "no strings attached" and with virtually no control over its use. Underlying this attitude was a deep-seated suspicion that the United States desired to totally supplant the French, economically as well as politically, in Indochina. 8/

2. French Leverage on the United States

French leverage over the United States was made possible by the conviction, apparently firmly held in Washington, that the maintenance of a non-Communist Indochina was vital to Western -- and specifically American -- interests.

a. Primarily it was France's War

The most fundamental fact was that the French were carrying on a war which the United States considered, rightly or wrongly, to be essential. Thus, the French were always able to threaten simply to end the war by pulling out of Indochina. By the early 1950's, with the French nation tired of the "la sale guerre," this would not have been an unpopular decision within France. Paris was thereby able to hint --

which it did -- that if U.S. assistance was not forthcoming, it would simply withdraw from Indochina, leaving to the United States alone the task of the containment of communism in Southeast Asia. When the Laniel Government requested in the fall of 1953 a massive increase in American assistance, the State Department representative at an NSC meeting asserted that "if this French Government, which proposes reinforcing Indochina with our aid, is not supported by us at this time, it may be the last such government prepared to make a real effort to win in Indochina." 9/ In effect, then, because of the overriding importance given by Washington to holding the communist line in Indochina, the French in being able to threaten to withdraw possessed an important instrument of blackmail.

The upshot of this was that U.S. leverage was quite minimal. Since the French were, in a way, fighting a U.S. battle as well as their own to prevent communist control of Indochina, any ham-fisted U.S. pressure was bound to weaken the French resolve and capability. Consequently, the leverage which the U.S. attained through its aid could be used for little more than to urge greater efficiency and determination on France. In other words, Washington could move Paris to formulate a Navarre type plan, but could not influence the way France conducted the war, nor could it move France on political issues in dispute.

b. Expectation of French Success

The temptation to "go along" with the French until the Viet Minh was defeated was all the more attractive because of the expectation of victory which pervaded official Washington. Before Dien Bien Phu, General O'Daniel consistently reported that victory was within reach if the United States continued its support. In November, 1953, General O'Daniel submitted a progress report on the Navarre Plan which summarized what the French had been doing and what remained to be accomplished. The report said that French Union forces held the initiative and would begin offensives in mid-January, 1954 in the Mekong Delta and in the region between Cape Varella and Da Nang. Meanwhile, a relatively small force would attempt to keep the Viet Minh off balance in the Tonkin Delta until October, 1954, when the French would begin a major offensive North of the 19th parallel. The report concluded by assessing that the Navarre Plan was basically sound and should be supported since it would bring a decisive victory. 10/

O'Daniel's optimism was not duplicated by other observers. CINCPAC, for one, considered the report over-optimistic, stating that political and psychological factors were of such crucial importance that no victory would be possible until the Vietnamese were able to capture villages and until psychological warfare operations could be undertaken to win over the people. 11/ The Army attaché in Saigon was even less sanguine. He flatly stated that the French, after six months of the Navarre Plan, were still on the defensive and showed no sign of being able to win the war in the future. The attaché's views were, moreover,

concurred in by the Assistant Chief of Staff for Intelligence, who observed that other high U.S. military officers in Indochina agreed with the attaché and found O'Daniel's report unwarrantedly optimistic. 12/

c. American Policy in Europe: The EDC

An important source of French leverage was to be found outside of Far Eastern affairs. A primary objective of American foreign policy in 1953-1954 was the creation of a European Defense Community (E.D.C.). The purpose of the EDC was to "envelope" a new West German Army into an integrated six nation army which would go a long way towards providing for the defense of Western Europe. Washington officials expected that the EDC would permit a reduction (but not complete elimination) of American ground forces in Europe. The membership of France in the EDC -- as a counter-weight to the proposed re-arming of Germany -- was essential to its adoption by the five other European nations. Because of the high priority given to EDC in American planning, there was a strong reluctance to antagonize the French in Indochina. This was reinforced by knowledge that the French placed a far lower priority on EDC, in part because of the traditional French fear of an armed Germany, in part because the French estimate of Soviet intentions in Western Europe differed from that of the United States in that it placed a low probability on a direct Soviet intervention. 13/

Apparently unnoticed at the time was an implicit contradiction in the American policy of pushing the French simultaneously on both adopting the EDC and on making a greater effort in Indochina. The latter required increased French forces in the Far East. But the French National Assembly would not adopt the EDC unless, at a minimum, it was assured that French forces in Europe would be on parity with those of Germany. Thus, the French argued that the possible coming into effect of the EDC prevented them from putting larger forces into Indochina. After the loss of North Vietnam and the French rejection of EDC, the Chairman of an Interdepartmental Working Group set up to formulate a new American policy on Indochina for the post-Geneva period observed that "our policies thus far have failed because we tried to hit two birds with one stone and missed both." 14/

d. French Desire for Negotiations

French leverage was also demonstrated by their ability to have the Indochina problem placed on the agenda for the Geneva Conference at the time of the Quadripartite Foreign Minister's meeting in February 1954 in Berlin. The Geneva Conference had been called to work out a political settlement for the Korean War. Dulles did not wish to negotiate on Indochina until there was a marked improvement in the military situation of the French and they could negotiate from a position of far greater strength. But the Laniel Government was under mounting pressure from French public opinion to end the Indochinese war. At Berlin the French delegation insisted, despite American objections, that Indochina be

inscribed on the Geneva agenda. Foreign Minister Bidault reportedly warned that if the United States did not acquiesce on this point, EDC would doubtlessly be scuttled.

Dulles did succeed in opposing Soviet efforts to gain for Communist China the status of a sponsoring power at Geneva and forced the acceptance in the Berlin communiqué of a statement that no diplomatic recognition would be implied in the Chinese invitation to the conference. In return for this concession, however, the French were able to give highly visible evidence of their interest in ending the war soon through negotiations. Ironically, this had a double-edged effect: in Paris the "peace faction" was mollified; but in Hanoi plans were made to step up the intensity of the war so as to make a show of strength prior to the beginning of the Geneva Conference. Thus, the coming battle of Dien Bien Phu came to have a crucial significance in large measure because of the very inclusion of the Indochina item for the Geneva Conference. As Ellen Hammer has written:

> "This was the last opportunity before the Geneva Conference for the Viet Minh to show its military strength, its determination to fight until victory. And there were those who thought that General Giap was resolved on victory, no matter the cost, not only to impress the enemy but also to convince his Communist allies that the Viet Minh by its own efforts had earned a seat at the conference table and the right to a voice in its own future. For the French....upon the outcome of the battle depended much of the spirit in which they would send their representatives to Geneva." 15/

e. Conclusion: Incompatibility of American and French Objectives

In summary, one must take notice of the paradox of U.S. policy vis-á-vis the French with respect to Indochina, 1950-1954. American interests and objectives were basically different from those of the French. The United States was concerned with the containment of communism and restricting the spread of Chinese influence in Southeast Asia. The immediate U.S. objective was supporting a domino. France, on the other hand, was fighting primarily a colonial war designed to maintain the French presence in Southeast Asia and avoid the crumbling of the French Union. Despite occasional pledges to the "perfectionment" of independence for the Associated States -- pledges which were usually given under circumstances which were forcing France to "justify" the war, in part to receive further American assistance -- France was not fighting a long and costly war in order to thereafter completely pull out.

The fact that the American and French means -- pushing for military victory -- converged in 1950-1954 obscured the fact that the ends of the two nations were inherently incompatible. This further led

to a basic incompatibility in the two strands of American policy: (1) Washington wanted France to fight the war and win, preferably with American guidance and advice; and (2) having achieved success at great cost in what the French viewed at least initially as more a "colonial" than "anti-communist" war, Washington expected the French to withdraw magnanimously. (A Frenchman might have asked how France, even if it wished to, could have left Indochina without creating similar pressures for withdrawal from Algeria, Tunisia, and Morocco, where over one million Frenchmen lived.) In this inherent inconsistency can be found much of the explanation for the lack of American leverage over France during the pre-Geneva years..

II. A. 3. PERCEPTIONS OF THE COMMUNIST THREAT TO SOUTHEAST ASIA AND TO BASIC U.S. INTERESTS

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II. A. 3. PERCEPTIONS OF THE COMMUNIST THREAT TO SOUTHEAST ASIA AND TO BASIC U.S. INTERESTS

Three major perceptions dominated U.S. thinking and policy-making on Indochina during the years 1950-1954. The first was the growing importance of Asia in world politics. The process of devolution from colonial empires to independent states, it was thought, would create power vacuums and conditions of instability which would make Asia susceptible to becoming a battleground in the growing East-West cold war conflict. Second, there was an undeniable tendency to view the worldwide "communist threat" in monolithic terms. This was perhaps understandable given the relatively extensive influence then exerted by the Soviet Union over other communist nations, and the communist parties in non-communist states. Moreover, the West, and especially the U.S., was challenged by the expansionist policies openly proclaimed by leaders of virtually all the communist movements. Third, the attempt of the patently Communist Ho Chi Minh regime to evict the French from Indochina was seen as part of the Southeast Asian manifestation of the communist world-wide aggressive intent. The resistance of France to Ho, therefore, was seen as a crucial stand on the line along which the West would contain communism.

1. "Domino Principle" Before Korea

These three perceptions help explain the widely held assumption in official Washington that if Indochina was "lost" to communism, the remaining nations of Southeast Asia would inexorably succumb to communist infiltration and be taken over in a chain reaction. This strategic conception of the communist threat to Southeast Asia pre-dated the outbreak in June 1950 of the Korean War. It probably had its period of gestation at the time of the Nationalist withdrawal from mainland China. NSC 48/1 was the key document in framing this conception. Drawn up in June 1949, after Secretary of Defense Louis Johnson had expressed concern at the course of events in Asia and had suggested a widening of the previous country-by-country memorandum approach to a regional plan, NSC 48/1 included the statements that "the extension of communist authority in China represents a grievous political defeat for us...If Southeast Asia is also swept by communism, we shall have suffered a major political rout the repercussions of which will be felt throughout the rest of the world, especially in the Middle East and in a then critically exposed Australia." 1/

It was Russia rather than China that was seen in 1949 as being the principal source of the communist threat in Asia. Although it was conceded that in the course of time China (or Japan or India) may attempt to dominate Asia, --

> "now and for the foreseeable future it is the USSR which threatens to dominate Asia through the complementary instruments of communist conspiracy and diplomatic pressure

> supported by military strength. For the foreseeable future, therefore, our immediate objective must be to contain and where feasible to reduce the power and influence of the USSR in Asia to such a degree that the Soviet Union is not capable of threatening the security of the United States from that area and that the Soviet Union would encounter serious obstacles should it attempt to threaten the peace, national independence or stability of the Asiatic nations."

NSC 48/1 also recognized that "the colonial-nationalist conflict provides a fertile field for subversive communist movements, and it is now clear that Southeast Asia is the target for a coordinated offensive directed by the Kremlin."

At this time, the NSC believed that the United States, as a Western power in any area where the bulk of the population had long been suspicious of Western influence, should insofar as possible refrain from taking any lead in Southeast Asia. The United States should instead "encourage the peoples of India, Pakistan, the Philippines and other Asian states to take the leadership in meeting the common problems of the area," recognizing "that the non-communist governments of South Asia already constitute a bulwark against communist expansion in Asia." NSC 48/2 pointed out that particular attention should be given to the problem of Indochina where "action should be taken to bring home to the French the urgency of removing the barriers to the obtaining by Bao Dai or other non-communist nationalist leaders of the support of a substantial proportion of the Vietnamese."

2. Importance of Indochina

Indochina was of special importance because it was the only area adjacent to China which contained a large European army which was in armed conflict with "communist" forces. The Chinese Communists were believed to be furnishing the Viet Minh with substantial material assistance. Official French sources reported that there were some Chinese troops in Tonkin, as well as large numbers ready for action against the French on the Chinese side of the border. The first NSC memorandum dealing solely with Indochina (NSC 64) was adopted as policy on March 27, 1950. This paper took note of Chinese assistance to the Viet Minh and estimated that it was doubtful that the French Expeditionary forces, combined with Indochinese troops, could successfully contain Ho Chi Minh's forces should they be strengthened by either Chinese troops crossing the border, or by communist-supplied arms and material in quantity.

NSC 64 -- written, it should be noted, by the Truman Administration and before the outbreak of the Korean War -- observed that "the threat of Communist aggression against Indochina is only one phase of anticipated communist plans to seize all of Southeast Asia." It concluded with a statement of what came to be known as the "domino principle":

"It is important to United States security interests that all practicable measures be taken to prevent further communist expansion in Southeast Asia. Indochina is a key area of Southeast Asia and is under immediate threat.

"The neighboring countries of Thailand and Burma could be expected to fall under Communist domination if Indochina were controlled by a Communist-dominated government. The balance of Southeast Asia would then be in grave hazard." 2/

i.e. no matter how installed

3. Impact of Start of Korean War

The outbreak of the Korean War, and the American decision to resist North Korean aggression, sharpened overnight our thoughts and actions with respect to Southeast Asia. The American military response symbolized in the most concrete manner possible the basic belief that holding the line in Southeast Asia was essential to American security interests. The French struggle in Indochina came far more than before to be seen as an integral part of the containment of communism in that region of the world. Accordingly, the United States intensified and enlarged its programs of aid in Indochina. Military aid shipments to Indochina acquired in 1951 the second highest priority, just behind the Korea war program. 3/

A consequence of the Korean War, and particularly the Chinese intervention, was that China replaced the Soviet Union as the principal source of the perceived communist threat in Southeast Asia. This was made explicit in NSC 124/2 (June 1952) which stated that "the danger of an overt military attack against Southeast Asia is inherent in the existence of a hostile and aggressive Communist China."

The "domino principle" in its purest form was written into the "General Considerations" section of NSC 124/2. It linked the loss of any single state of Southeast Asia to the stability of Europe and the security of the United States:

"2. Communist domination, by whatever means, of all Southeast Asia would seriously endanger in the short term, and critically endanger in the longer term, United States security interests.

"a. The loss of any of the countries of Southeast Asia to communist control as a consequence of overt or covert Chinese Communist aggression would have critical psychological, political and economic consequences. In the absence of effective and timely counteraction, the loss of any single country would probably lead to relatively swift submission to or an alignment with communism by the remaining countries of this group. Furthermore, an alignment with communism of

the rest of Southeast Asia and India, and in the longer term, of the Middle East (with the probable exceptions of at least Pakistan and Turkey) would in all probability progressively follow. Such widespread alignment would endanger the stability and security of Europe. wow!

"b. Communist control of all of Southeast Asia would render the U.S. position in the Pacific offshore island chain precarious and would seriously jeopardize fundamental U.S. security interests in the Far East.

"c. Southeast Asia, especially Malaya and Indonesia, is the principal world source of natural rubber and tin, and a producer of petroleum and other strategically important commodities. The rice exports of Burma and Thailand are critically important to Malaya, Ceylon and Hong Kong and are of considerable significance to Japan and India, all important areas of free Asia.

"d. The loss of Southeast Asia, especially of Malaya and Indonesia, could result in such economic and political pressures in Japan as to make it extremely difficult to prevent Japan's eventual accommodation to communism." 4/

The possibility of a large-scale Chinese intervention in Indochina, similar to the Chinese intervention in Korea, came to dominate the thinking of American policy-makers after the start of the Korean War. Such an intervention would not have been surprising given the larger numbers of Chinese troops massed along the Tonkin border and the materiel assistance being given to the Viet Minh. The NIE of December 1950 considered direct Chinese intervention to be "impending." 5/ The following year it was estimated that after an armistice in Korea the Chinese would be capable of intervention in considerable strength, but would be inhibited from acting overtly by a number of factors, including the risk of American retaliation and the disadvantages attendant upon involvement in another protracted campaign. 6/ By early 1952, as the French position showed signs of deterioration, intelligence authorities believed that the Chinese would be content to continue aiding the Viet Minh without undertaking direct involvement (except for material aid) unless provoked into it. 7/ Thus, the intelligence community, after estimating a high risk of Chinese intervention at the start of the Korean War, gradually reduced its estimate of Indochina being broadened into a wider war as the Viet Minh showed signs of doing well enough on their own.

Nevertheless, the NSC undertook in 1952 to list a course of action for the "resolute defense" of Indochina in case of a large-scale Chinese intervention. It included the provision of air and naval forces; the interdiction of Chinese communication lines, including those in China proper; and a naval blockade of the China coast. If these "minimum courses of action" did not prove to be sufficient, the U.S. should take air and

naval action "against all suitable military targets in China," when possible in conjunction with British and French forces. 8/

In prescribing these recommended actions, the NSC focused on the less likely contingency of a Chinese intervention rather than the more likely contingency of the continued deterioration of the French position in Indochina itself. It did so despite the fact that NSC 124/2 conceded that the "primary threat" was the situation in Indochina itself (increasing subversive efforts by indigenous communist forces, increased guerrilla activity, and increased Viet Minh civil control over population and territory). Apparently, the NSC wanted to make clear that direct U.S. involvement in Indochina was to be limited to dealing with direct Chinese involvement. In the absence of this contingency, however, and to meet the existing situation in Indochina, the NSC recommended that the United States increase its level of aid to French Union forces but "without relieving the French authorities of their basic military responsibility for the defense of the Associated States." 9/

4. Republican Administration and Far East

Two events in 1953 served to deepen the American commitment in Indochina. The first was the arrival of a Republican Administration following a long period in which the G.O.P. had persistently accused the Truman Administration of being responsible for the "loss" of China to communism. The writings and speeches of John Foster Dulles before the election left no doubt that he regarded Southeast Asia as a key region in the conflict with communist "imperialism", and that it was important to draw the line of containment north of the Rice Bowl of Asia -- the Indochina peninsula. 10/ In his first State of the Union Message on February 3, 1953, President Eisenhower promised a "new, positive foreign policy." He went on to link the communist aggression in Korea and Malaya with Indochina. Dulles subsequently spoke of Korea and Indochina as two flanks, with the principal enemy -- Red China -- in the center. A special study mission headed by Representative Walter Judd, a recognized Republican spokesman on Asia, surveyed the Far East and reported on its view of the high stakes involved:

> "The area of Indochina is immensely wealthy in rice, rubber, coal, and iron ore. Its position makes it a strategic key to the rest of Southeast Asia. If Indochina should fall, Thailand and Burma would be in extreme danger, Malaya, Singapore and even Indonesia would become more vulnerable to the Communist power drive....Communism would then be in an exceptional position to complete its perversion of the political and social revolution that is spreading through Asia....The Communists must be prevented from achieving their objectives in Indochina." 11/

The Republican Administration clearly intended to prevent the loss of Indochina by taking a more forthright, anti-communist stand.

5. Impact of Korean Armistice

Second, the armistice in Korea created apprehension that the Chinese Communists would now turn their attention to Indochina. President Eisenhower warned in a speech on April 16, 1953, that any armistice in Korea that merely released armed forces to pursue an attack elsewhere would be a fraud. Secretary Dulles continued this theme after the Korean armistice in a speech on September 2, 1953, on the war in Indochina. After noting that "a single Communist aggressive front extends from Korea on the north to Indochina in the south" he said:

> "Communist China has been and now is training, equipping and supplying the Communist forces in Indochina. There is the risk that, as in Korea, Red China might send its own Army into Indochina. The Chinese Communist regime should realize that such a second aggression could not occur without grave consequences which might not be confined to Indochina. I say this soberly...in the hope of preventing another aggressor miscalculation." 12/

Underlying these warnings to China was the belief that the difference between success or failure in avoiding a takeover of all Vietnam by Ho Chi Minh probably depended upon the extent of Chinese assistance or direct participation. Signaling a warning to China was probably designed to deter further Chinese involvement. Implicit in the signals was the threat that if China came into the war, the United States would be forced to follow suit, preferably with allies but, if necessary, alone. Furthermore, the Eisenhower Administration implied that in keeping with its policy of massive retaliation the United States would administer a punishing nuclear blow to China without necessarily involving its land forces in an Asian war.

6. Deepening of U.S. Commitment to Containment

In addition to the new mood in Washington created by the strategic perceptions of a new Administration and the Korean armistice, the Viet Minh invasion of Laos in the spring of 1953 and the deepening war weariness in France served to strengthen those who favored a more assertive policy in Indochina. The United States rushed supplies to Laos and Thailand in May 1953 and provided six C-119's with civilian crews for the airlift into Laos. 13/ It increased substantially the volume and tempo of American military assistance to French Union forces. For fiscal year 1954, $460 million in military assistance was planned. Congress only appropriated $400 million, but following the presentation by the French of the Navarre Plan an additional $385 million was decided upon by the NSC. 14/ No objection was raised when France asked our views in August, 1953, on the transfer of its battalion in Korea to Indochina and subsequently took this action. 15/ The Navarre Plan, by offering a format for victory which promised success without the direct involvement of American military forces, tended, because of its very attractiveness, to have the effect of enlarging our commitment to assist the French towards achieving a military solution.

In the last NSC paper approved before the Indochina situation was totally transformed by the French defeat at Dien Bien Phu and the Geneva Conference, the "successful defense of Tonkin" was said to be the "keystone of the defense of mainland Southeast Asia except possibly Malaya." 16/ NSC 5405 took some, but probably not sufficient, account of the deterioration in the French position which had occurred since NSC 124/2 was approved eighteen months earlier. It, nevertheless, repeated the domino principle in detail, including the admonition that "such is the interrelation of the countries of the area that effective counteraction would be immediately necessary to prevent the loss of any single country from leading to submission to, or an alignment with, communism by the remaining countries of Southeast Asia and Indonesia." The document also noted that:

> "In the conflict in Indochina, the Communists and non-Communists worlds clearly confront one another in the field of battle: The loss of the struggle in Indochina, in addition to its impact in Southeast Asia and South Asia, would therefore have the most serious repercussions on U.S. and free world interests in Europe and elsewhere."

The subject of possible negotiations was broached in NSC 5405, following the observation that political pressures in France may impel the French Government to seek a negotiated rather than a military settlement. It was noted (before Dien Bien Phu) that if the Navarre Plan failed or appeared doomed to failure, the French might seek to negotiate simply for the best possible terms, irrespective of whether these offered any assurance of preserving a non-communist Indochina.

In this regard the NSC decided the U.S. should employ every feasible means to influence the French Government against concluding the struggle on terms "inconsistent" with the basic U.S. objectives. The French should be told that: (1) in the absence of a marked improvement in the military situation, there was no basis for negotiation on acceptable terms; (2) the U.S. would "flatly oppose any idea" of a cease-fire as a preliminary to negotiations, because such a cease-fire would result in an irretrievable deterioration of the Franco-Vietnamese military position in Indochina; (3) a nominally non-communist coalition regime would eventually turn the country over to Ho Chi Minh with no opportunity for the replacement of the French by the United States or the United Kingdom. /Emphasis Added/

7. Conclusion

In conclusion, two comments can be made:

a. With the growing perception of a Chinese threat to Indochina, and, therefore, to all of Southeast Asia, the U.S. Government tended to concentrate on the military rather than the political aspects of the French-Viet Minh struggle. In consequence, American attention focused on (1) deterring external intervention from China, and (2) assisting the French

in successfully prosecuting the war through the implementation of the Navarre Plan. The result of this was that the encouragement and support of the non-communist nationalist governments in the Associated States was almost inadvertently given lower priority. The United States was reluctant to press the French too strongly on taking measures to foster Vietnam nationalism because of its overriding interest in halting the potential sweep of communism through Southeast Asia. Moreover, it was easier to develop a policy for dealing with the external threat of intervention than to meet the internal threat of subversion, or the even more difficult process of finding and sustaining a genuine nationalist alternative to the Viet Minh.

b. The "domino theory" and the assumptions behind it were never questioned. The homogeneity of the nations of Southeast Asia was taken as a given, as was the linkage in their ability to remain democratic, or at an acceptable minimum, non-communist, nations. Undoubtedly, in the first decade of the cold war there existed an unfortunate stereotype of a monolithic communist expansionary bloc. It was reinforced by a somewhat emotional approach on the part of many Americans to communism in China and Asia. This "syndrome" was, in part, the result of the "fall" of China, which some felt could have been averted, and a few hoped would still be reversed.

Accordingly, not sufficient cognizance was taken of the individuality of the states of Southeast Asia and the separateness of their societies. Probably there was some lack of knowledge in depth on the part of Washington policy-makers about the area. No one before World War II had expected that the United States would be called upon to take a position of leadership in these remote colonial territories of our European allies. In hindsight, these shortcomings may have led to the fallacious belief that a neutralist or communist Indochina would inevitably draw the other states of Asia into the communist bloc or into neutralism. But the "fallacy" was neither evident then, nor is it demonstrable now in retrospect.